

The Ideals of an Islamic Order

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THE STATE

In an age now past but not forgotten, nearly all Muslims lived in the shelter of an Islamic order. The Mughal, Ottoman, and Qajar empires, the last of the vast Muslim polities, identified themselves unreservedly with the cause of Islam, as had their predecessors. They and their allies were the “party of God”; their enemies were the “enemies of God.” Their wars were always *jihads*, “in the path of God,” and the lives of their subjects were ordered by the infallible laws of God. Their decrees were issued in the name of God alone, for sovereignty was God’s, to be exercised by man solely on His behalf. Prosperity, for man and state, was by the grace of God.

These regimes disintegrated, however, and, following an interlude of foreign rule, they were replaced by scores of lesser states premised on the new notion of a secular order. These new polities invested the nation with those attributes once reserved for God: sovereignty, infallibility, and immortality. Government was now to serve the will of the people; service to God was henceforth a matter left to individual conscience. Islam and the state were put asunder by political and legal acts that followed so closely on foreign precedent as to approach conscious mimicry. There was little choice: before the modern intrusion of the West, the languages of Muslim peoples possessed no word for secularism.

The first step toward reviving an Islamic order is thus the refutation of the secular idea and the reunion of the state with its appointed mission. “Politics is a part of religion,” asserted Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s General Guide Hasan al-Banna, who was assassinated in 1949. “Islam encompasses the ruler and the ruled. Thus there is not in its teachings a rendering to Caesar that which is Caesar’s, and to God that which is God’s. Rather . . . Caesar and what belongs to Caesar is for God Almighty alone.” Khomeini concurs:

Do not heed those who imagine that Islam is like present-day Christianity, that the mosque is no different than the church, or that Islam is merely a relationship between the individual and his Lord.

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Imperialist institutions instilled evil in the hearts of men, saying that religion does not meet with politics . . . Most unfortunately, some of us have given credence to those lies. (Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *al-Hukuma al-Islamiyya* [Islamic Government], [Beirut, n.d.], 10, 138, as translated by author)

Hasan al-Banna thus rejects the concept of the temporal state; Khomeini repudiates that of the spiritual church. To discern such institutions in Islam is nonsensical; in their visions of the future, religion and state are inseparably entwined.

So it was in the idealized past. The Prophet Muhammad himself, writes Khomeini, formed a government. He appointed governors, sat in judgment, dispatched ambassadors, concluded treaties, and waged war (Khomeini, 24-25). The obligation to follow this precedent of political commitment is still binding upon all believers. "No Muslim can say that he does not engage in politics," said Shaykh Mustafa al-Maraghi, once rector of Al-Azhar and himself a willing agent of kings. "Were he to say so, he

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would be ignorant of his religion. How could he make such a sweeping statement since his religion laid down principles governing peace and war, treaties and alliances?" When a delegation of *al-Fath*, principal constituent of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), was denied entry to a 1969 Islamic conference of 23 states in Kuala Lumpur, on the grounds that the conference was not "political," the delegation countered that their exclusion was inadmissible as Islam did not differentiate between politics and religion (*Al-Ahram*, April 26, 1969). *Al-Fath* was awarded observer status.

Just as politics and Islam are inseparable, power and Islam are inseparable. Islam, the "religion of God," cannot play the role of a loyal opposition, for there can be no higher authority, no more compelling loyalty. Says Iran's radio: "Those who do not govern according to the laws given by God are infidels, oppressive, and corrupt . . . Islam is a state; Islam is a government." (British Broadcasting Corporation's World Summary of Broadcasts for the Middle East (BBC/ME), February 15, 1979). So the state must avow that it serves the cause of Islam, that it is, in fact, a willing instrument of God in His design. Premodern Muslim polities rarely acted without explicit reference to Islam; their rulers invariably styled themselves protectors, pillars, and swords of Islamic realms in their correspondence and decrees. The state thus collectively affirmed its faith as the individual believer does through the *shahada*: There is but one God, and Muhammad is His prophet.

Most Muslims now insist on some sort of a return to collective avowal, and it is

widely achieved through a standard article in the constitutions of all but a handful of states populated by Muslim majorities: Islam is declared to be the state religion. By that short profession of faith, these states have defined themselves Muslim states, and so acknowledge Islam's relevance to the legitimate exercise of authority. This is not a formality that passes without notice. The omission of such an article in 1973 from a new draft constitution for Syria served as the pretext for rioting. A few states go even further, and offer an additional profession: they name themselves Islamic republics. Pakistan, Mauritania, and now Iran (through referendum) are self-avowedly Muslim through their official appellations. An article in the constitution or an official designation are not yet acts; but they are symbolic self-statements and a necessary prelude to any restoration of Islam to political primacy.

THE LAW

There is more to an Islamic order, however, than ambiguous credos. "Islam is an application of the laws of God at the official level," continues Iran's radio. And in a past era, much of life was moored to the *shari'a*, a highly developed system of law and ethics. So crucial was the role of the *shari'a* that the *dar al-islam*, the world of Islam, itself was often defined as those lands where the writ of Islamic law ran unimpeded. Drawn principally from the Quran, the sacred text, and the Prophet's personal example, then refined through jurisprudence, the *shari'a* provided a systematic justice that satisfied many of the changing requirements of Muslims across wide expanses for over a millennium. Islamic law had always been under stress, but it did not snap until the disruptive arrival of the Napoleonic Code.

A new justice then usurped the authority of Islamic law in field after field. Based on the positive rights of man rather than a revealed set of obligations, Western law was confessedly the work of human intellect, and so responded with innovation wherever Muslim jurists retreated to precedent. The Western campaign against Islamic law was relentless: Quranic punishments were ridiculed as cruel and outdated, and the separation of non-Muslims into a subordinate and autonomous legal genus, a principle that dates to the earliest Muslim conquests, was deemed incompatible with the idea of equality under one law. The system of taxation based on Quranic prescriptions and confessional affiliation was rejected as ineffective and discriminatory. Islam's great legal legacy was portrayed as systematic injustice, riddled with indefensible inequities. Unable to answer its critics, immobilized by rigid jurists, Islamic law gradually receded before Western law. Some Muslim states went so far as to adopt (under duress or by choice) entire legal codes from European models and to abolish *shari'a* courts. Lawyers, jurists, and judges were no longer drawn from the *madrasahs*, forums of traditional education, but from law faculties of modern universities.

For some, the decline of the *shari'a* dismembered Islam and the reconstruction of Islamic law is considered essential to the function of a new Islamic order. These critics maintain it is no coincidence that a precipitous rise in lawlessness had followed the imposition of a Western law that is both ineffectual and unsuited to the needs of other

societies. Islamic law once provided a far more binding social contract, and can do so again. Khomeini, ever the maximalist, insists on full restoration of the shari'a. "You have no need for new legislation; simply put into effect that which has already been legislated for you. This will save you a good deal of time and effort Everything, praise be to God, is ready-made for use" (Khomeini, 134).

The model, again, is to be found in early Islam: "The Prophet severed hands, administered floggings and stonings; after him, the duties of his successors were no less than his own" (Khomeini, 23). So Iran's legal code, drawn not from the Prophet's example but from French and Belgian statutes, must be discarded. In the criminal sphere, the Islamic punishments (*hudud*) must be reinstated and administered by shari'a courts. Matters of personal status must again be determined by the shari'a provisions; banking practices and taxation must be altered to meet the requirements of Islamic law. *Hudud* were partially restored by Iran's *komitehs* (revolutionary committees) even before the adoption of a new constitution or legal code, and the speculation is that the bulk of criminal cases, all family cases, and some civil cases will be handed over to the shari'a courts.

Iranian legal practices may eventually resemble those of Saudi Arabia, where the shari'a still regulates most matters lost to Western-style codes elsewhere. Under Saudi influence, the application of Islamic law has become commonplace in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and the smaller Gulf states. And in February 1979, Pakistan's President Zia ul-Haq promulgated an order and five ordinances that reinstated Islamic punishments for adultery, theft, and defamation, and expanded the Islamic prohibition of alcohol to all Pakistani nationals regardless of religion. The traditional taxes of *zakat* and *ushr* (regarding the obligatory collection of alms through income tax) were to be reinstated in 1979; state lending institutions were ordered to cease lending at fixed interest rates (condemned by most jurists as "usury") and shift to equity participation. The entire body of Pakistani law (much of it drawn from English practice) was to be examined to determine whether "any law or provision of law is repugnant to the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and the Sunna of the Holy Prophet" (*Dawn Overseas*, February 17, 1979).

Similar legislation (including the death penalty for apostasy to Islam) was before the Egyptian People's Assembly in 1977, but met with no success because of stiff opposition from the Coptic minority. Still, Egypt and a number of other states have opted for constitutional formulas that refer to Islamic law as "the principal source of legislation," or stipulate that no law shall be enacted that directly contradicts the shari'a. These imprecise provisions allow a good deal more latitude, but they demonstrate the enduring need for political authority to be reconciled with an Islamic law that serves both as a source of legitimacy and as a remedy for rising crime in societies being turned over by rapid change.

An Islamic order should unite religion and politics, establish an avowedly Muslim state, and enforce some degree of Islamic law. On these points there is a vague and unarticulated consensus among committed Muslims. Opinion then divides over the

principles of an Islamic political system, an Islamic economic order, an Islamic social program, an Islamic foreign policy—in short, the substance of politics. Iranians may agree to the establishment of an Islamic republic, but unanimity ends where discussion turns from broad principles to details. Khomeini was aware of this problem during his brief exile in Neauphle-le-Chateau, where he studiously evaded any specific indications of his vision of the future: “As for the program of an Iranian Islamic republic, it will be declared later.” The revolution was in a delicate stage; unity was essential and silence was golden. In the current transformation from slogan to reality, however, the vision of an Islamic order has included varied, often contradictory, interpretations.

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

The division of opinion over Islamic principles of political organization has dramatically split the ranks of the single cause. Islamic political thought at the dawn of the modern era had evolved in a manner that subordinated the means to the end. Almost any form of government was tolerated as long as it enabled Muslims to fulfill their Muslim obligations and to defend them. Even Khomeini said that current rulers, if they recognized and followed the “Islamic program,” would not be driven from their seats. “Rather, we will leave those of them who are obedient and faithful to [the program’s] execution in their places” (Khomeini, 135).

However, Muslim critics of the status quo are now in agreement that the present system is intolerable. They argue that the government’s structure is but institutionalized amorality, led by individuals committed to no higher purpose than self-aggrandizement. The art of government must be rediscovered, again in precedent.

Both the practice of the Prophet and Quranic injunctions can be interpreted in a variety of senses, but none of them should appear to an outsider as definitive. It is often said, for instance, that the Prophet ruled by consultation with his followers as a first among equals, and that the decisions of the early Muslim community were taken collectively through a sort of proto-democracy. Khomeini, on the other hand, admits no limits to the Prophet’s authority:

Government in Islam means obedience to the law and its arbitration. The authority of the Prophet and his legal successors after him was derived from God. God commanded obedience to the Prophet and those in authority after him: ‘Obey the Prophet and those in authority among you’ (Quran, iv, 59). There is no room for opinions or passions in the government of Islam, since the Prophet, *imams*, and people followed the will of God and His shari'a. (Khomeini, 43)

Dispute over the precedent set by an idealized past carries over to debate on the future. The controversy now fueled by the historical argument revolves around whether an Islamic order must incorporate democratic institutions. In October 1978, Ayatollah Shariatmadari told an interviewer that “we want dictatorship to be replaced

by true democracy," and that Khomeini "wants to set up a democratic government based on Islamic law" (Foreign Broadcast Information Service/Middle East (FBIS/ME), October 30, 1978). After the revolution, Premier Mehdi Bazargan continued to link an Islamic order to democracy:

If we consider Islam and democracy as synonymous and group them together it is because they are another expression of the behest of God and the people, of the Creator and His creatures. The call of God is the call of the people: and the call of the pious people is the call of God. Therefore, the government of the Islamic Republic is a democratic republic and a genuine, democratic republic is Islamic. (BBC/ME, February 12, 1979)

Ayatollah Qumi reproached "those abroad who accuse the Iranian people's struggle of being reactionary and retrograde," arguing that "we are fighting against absolutism, since only democracy can promote spiritual and human progress" (*Le Monde*, November 12-13, 1978). Even Khomeini said, while still in exile, that the Islamic republic would be "a people's democracy" (*Le Monde*, November 15, 1978), although that couplet usually recalls the authoritarian regimes of Eastern Europe rather than the traditions of Westminster.

Since his return to Iran, however, Khomeini has clarified his position:

What the nation wants is an Islamic republic, not just a republic, not a democratic republic, nor a democratic Islamic republic. Do not use this word "democratic." That is the Western style. We respect Western civilization but we will not follow it. (*Guardian*, March 2, 1979)

Our problem is that we are too much influenced by the West. For long years, we have been under the influence of America. It will take time to change, but you have to make an effort. You say we are standing on our own feet now, but you are still talking of a democratic republic, which means a Western republic. (*International Herald Tribune*, March 8, 1979)

Khomeini's remarks do not constitute the rejection of a mere word discredited for its Greek etymology and traditional association with Western institutions. Other eloquent proponents of an Islamic order have put forth compelling reasons for their rejection of the concept behind the term. Islam is "the very antithesis of secular, Western democracy," writes Abu'l Ala al-Mawdudi, the late guide of the *Jamiat-i-Islami*, the foremost of Pakistan's rising *Islampasand* (Islam-loving) parties. "The philosophical foundation of Western democracy is the sovereignty of the people. Lawmaking is their prerogative and legislation must correspond to the mood and temper of their opinion Islam altogether repudiates the philosophy of popular sovereignty and rears its polity on the foundation of the sovereignty of God and the viceregency (*khilafat*) of man." Khomeini has said much the same thing. Islamic government is constitutional (*dusturi*), he says, but not in the widely understood sense of representation by parliamentary regime or people's assemblies. "One can distinguish between Islamic government and constitutional regimes, both monarchial and republican. In the latter, it is the representatives of the people or the king who legislate, whereas [in

the former] the authority to legislate rests with God Almighty . . . no one can enforce that which God did not reveal" (Khomeini, 41-42).

Conflict is inescapable. Bazargan believes that "the call of God is the call of the people; and the call of the pious people is the call of God," while Mawdudi and Khomeini counter that the will of God should never be confused with the "mood and temper" of men. Practically speaking, Bazargan is inclined to entrust representative institutions with a wide scope, while Khomeini has said that Islam has no place for a legislative branch at all. The political system advocated by Khomeini in his published work would rest instead upon Muslims who best understand God-given law. These are the *fuqaha*, Islam's jurist-scholars, to whom the mantle of the Prophet has fallen. "The *fuqaha* are rulers over kings," according to *ahadith* (saying of the Prophet) cited by Khomeini; "the believing *fuqaha* are the fortresses of Islam" runs another. He equates obedience to them with obedience to God and His Prophet. Most of Khomeini's book on Islamic government is an exhortation to the *fuqaha* to meet their obligation to exercise authority and enforce the law on behalf of God.

The roots of the recent struggle between Bazargan's government and Khomeini's komitehs, between Tehran and Qum, lie in these conflicting interpretations of the legacy of Islam and the idealized past. Obviously, consensus on what sort of political system complies with an Islamic order is distant. Military rule of a Qaddafi, or a Saudi-style monarchy, rule by secret committees, theologians, caliphs, and elected representatives—each has its adherents. Khomeini says: "Monarchy and hereditary monarchy are sinister and worthless forms of government." A monarch, King Hassan of Morocco, replies: "That is the heresy of the Shi'i, that he wants to impose something which does not exist in Islam, namely a clergy" (BBC/ME, February 10, 1979). The perennial problem of Islam and government draws no closer to a solution.

No matter what form of Islamic government Muslims eventually establish, there is no question that the ideal regime should be manned and led by Muslims. The medieval jurists were unequivocal on this point: there were many kinds of Muslim tyranny, but all were theoretically preferable to the insufferable rule by non-Muslims over Muslims. The religion of God was Islam, and His authority could only be vested in Muslims; the practice of government by non-Muslims was wholly illegitimate. In

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truth, Muslims were often ill-tolerated as minorities, and so were encouraged by their brethren to flee the territories that fell under non-Muslim jurisdiction by conquest. This was eventually cast as a religious obligation, and justified by Quranic citations. The Ottoman government systematically resettled Muslims from its lost territories

elsewhere, and some of these populations survive as distinct communities. As recently as 1920, some 40,000 abandoned their homes in India at the behest of *ulama* who had decided that India under British rule was no longer dar al-islam. The government of Muslims by Muslims was at the foundation of an Islamic order then, and remains so. The constitutions of several countries provide that the head of state must be of the Muslim faith. Even the laical regime of Baathist Syria was led to include such a provision in a 1973 draft constitution after protests. Public demonstrations of faith by heads of state—observance of prayer, a pilgrimage, or the regular resort to Quranic citation—are standard media fare. Although Muslims are no longer enjoined to flee the imposition of non-Muslim rule, there are few Muslim peoples and minorities that are wholly reconciled to government by others. The political indigestibility of Muslims disturbs polities as scattered as the Philippines, India, Ethiopia, Israel, Cyprus, and perhaps even the Soviet Union.

THE ECONOMY

When discussion turns to the economic system most faithful to Islamic principles, there is again profound disagreement. Whether Islam sanctions private or collective ownership, capitalist or socialist modes of production, or perhaps something in between, remains a contested question.

Again, arguments draw upon the idealized past. In attacking the Saudis in 1966, Gamal Abd al-Nasir told an interviewer: "You mention what [the] Prophet Muhammad owned and what King Faysal now owns, and you will find the answer to his allegations that he represents Islam. Islam calls for sharing the loaf of bread with your brothers, which, in the modern age, means socialism" (BBC/ME, May 12, 1966). Nasir's Egypt became the center for the propagation of Islamic socialist theories, and the idea survives. An example is the exhortation of Qaddafi's colleague, Abd al-Salam Ahmad Jallud, to a 1973 conference of foreign ministers in Tripoli: "Brothers, Islam is right; Islam is revolution; Islam is progressiveness: Islam is socialism: Islam is social justice. Brothers, any country which regards socialism as apostasy and which rejects progressiveness as apostasy is actually discrediting and disclaiming this tolerant mission" (FBIS/ME, March 26, 1973). An extreme example of the socialist interpretation appeared in Cairo's *Ruz al-Yusuf* on July 12, 1976, where an "intellectual" claiming to represent the "religious Left" was interviewed. In his view, Islam opposed private ownership of land, the Prophet Muhammad had instituted a social revolution on behalf of the poor and oppressed, and "religion in capitalist society is hypocrisy." Even construction of mosques was forbidden in Islam as long as the unemployed were in need of factories and Muslims had to sleep on the pavement for lack of housing. Prayer, if need be, could be performed in the open air, for the floor of the desert served as the Prophet's mosque.

Regimes that have pursued collectivist policies, as Nasir's had, have retreated to this version of Islamic economy in the face of criticism. South Yemen's Abd al-Fattah Ismail told assembled *ulama* that Islam means "rejecting and fighting persecution and

the exploitation of man by his fellow man," and that class struggle had precedents in Islam. Afghanistan's Nur Muhammad Taraki claimed that "if we are introducing reforms, it is not contrary to Islam, for equality, fraternity and social justice are clearly an article of faith in the holy dogmata of Islam" (JPRS, 71887).

But for others, "Islam does not recognize class war" (the resolution of a Saudi-sponsored Islamic conference in 1962) and upholds the "legitimate rights of individuals." In 1975, Shaykh al-Azhar Abd al-Halim Mahmud wrote an article for *Akhir Sa'ah* in which he argued the irreconcilability of Islam and Marxism. The very words socialism and Marxism were inapplicable. Said the Azhar's deputy director: "Why do we borrow strange imported terms for our society[?] . . . Refraining from the use of these foreign terms will prevent confusion between the teachings of Islam and those of socialism and Marxism" (JPRS, 65886). The vitriolic exchange that followed between *Akhbar al-Yawm* and *Ruz al-Yusuf* on Islam and Marxism led the government (through the Arab Socialist Union) to suspend temporarily the press debate over Islamic principles and economic thought.

Perhaps the most insistent view holds that Islam provides the foundations of a unique and superior economic system. Twenty-five years ago, Anwar Sadat said that the economic system of Islam constituted "a happy medium between greedy Western capitalism and the slavery of Soviet communism." Qaddafi has placed Islamic economy squarely between "exploitative capitalism and totalitarian socialism; it finds its sources in the precepts of Islam . . . It allows all, rich and poor both, to build a society of abundance and justice" (*Le Monde*, May 6, 1971). These statements are little help in defining an Islamic economy. The system in mind is perhaps a form of state capitalism or *étatism*, or may have no definable content at all. Scholars such as Maxime Rodinson have shown that Muslims have accommodated their revealed texts to a wide variety of economic practices: in the economic sphere, Islam does not dictate.

There is perhaps a strand of social justice that is common to most Muslim visions of a new order, but even that can be elusive. Islamic social justice in some instances may imply no more than the compulsory collection of alms (zakat) by the state in the form of an income tax and its distribution through welfare agencies. Or it may mean, in Ayatollah Shariatmadari's words, "an equal distribution of riches." The idea that Muslims should control their own resources and industries is also widespread. Khomeini announced in November 1979, "The country's economy, likewise, will be freed from dependence on foreign countries, and the economic plans will no longer be in harmony with the interests of the international companies in Iran." The appropriate limits of foreign enterprise are hardly agreed upon; however, a wide variety of oil policies are justified in Islamic terms. Jidda's *al-Ukaz* editorial commented that "Saudi Arabia's insistence on stabilizing the oil prices and on connecting these prices, both negatively and positively, to the degrees of economic prosperity in the world reflects the Islamic philosophy to which we adhere . . . The first requirement of this philosophy is the rejection of injustices in dealings and the exploitation of the rights of others" (August 10, 1979). Khomeini, on the other hand, would argue that the oil

"monopolies" were the first to commit such injustices, and Qaddafi would no doubt concur; neither has been among those the consumers choose to call "price moderates."

Without definitive guidelines in Islam, economic policy must be determined on a pragmatic basis; justifications are then drawn from the inexhaustable reservoir of Islamic precedent. That economic policies should be legitimized by linking them to principles set by God indicates insecurity, a lack of public confidence in policy made solely by man. The economic dislocations of change are among the most severe; that Muslims should now seek some sort of remedy drawn from their past speaks of their profound discomfort with the inequality that splits societies thrust too precipitously into modernity.

SOCIETY

Societies in Muslim Asia and Africa exchanged influences with Western societies from the very inception of Islam. Many achievements of both civilizations were the product of an exchange of ideas and a cultural symbiosis between Islam and the West, even during periods of military rivalry. The rise of the modern West ended that fair exchange; it had been predicated upon a certain equilibrium, and that balance was lost. The influence of the West now overwhelmed Muslim societies and they were broken open. The question asked by advocates of an Islamic order is whether society must again be sealed up and protected in order to restore "authenticity" and integrity. How much diversity can be tolerated?

The societal role of women is perhaps the most controversial of these questions. Khomeini's confrontation with Iranian women activists over the traditional *chador* garments, abortion, divorce, and property rights is too well known to warrant repetition. There are other issues of comparable importance, such as the future of non-Muslim minorities and Muslim sects not in accord with the majority—both conduits of foreign ideas and customs. Can faded standards of morality, education, and entertainment be restored? What of freedom of expression, of the press?

The direction that Islamic orders have taken is undeniably toward conformism and the reassertion of conservative norms. This is not extraordinary in societies under stress, but in an Islamic order, the enforcement of norms is left not to social consensus but to state coercion. In an earlier era there were state-appointed officers to oversee vast spheres of moral conduct. Khomeini has now proposed a "Ministry of Righteous Behavior and Prevention of Sin" (*Guardian*, March 24, 1979), which would fulfill roughly the task being performed on an arbitrary basis by virtually autonomous and decentralized komitehs. Saudi Arabia has always had officers charged with supervision of moral bearing and religious observance. The less subtle enforcers in Muslim states have inconvenienced, arrested, or punished men and women who offended the collective sense of propriety. They have intimidated and shut newspapers, regulated entertainment media, and enforced the performance of religious rituals. They have harassed heterodox sects on the fringes of Islam and religious minorities.

There is no reason to suppose that these methods need characterize all Islamic orders, or that such tactics even differ much from those that prevail in many parts of the world. However, the current interpretation of Islamic law, like its precedent, is suspicious of social pluralism, and sometimes openly hostile. Such collective moral

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authoritarianism represents perhaps a last attempt to shore up a sense of communal solidarity threatened by a spreading individualism.

A composite Islamic order, then, provides for a state integrated with religion, a state self-avowedly Muslim, led by Muslims, in which the law of Islam enjoys a privileged position. Whatever its nature, the political system is said to follow Islamic precedent; the economic system, of whatever sort, is held to exemplify Islamic values of social justice. Society is aligned with the state's interpretation of Islamic principles, and the state enforces that interpretation through state institutions. Furthermore, its foreign policy will reflect a special obligation toward other Muslim states and peoples.

What lies beyond these very broad outlines? No one interprets Islam in a single sense that is binding upon all believers; like the present world of Marxism-Leninism, the world of Islam possesses no single nucleus. There is (as yet) no prestigious center for the propagation of the true faith, no compelling leader to whom the faithful look for authoritative pronouncements, no model Islamic order to which all turn in emulation. An Islamic order is in truth many orders, many nostalgias, many visions of the future. There are those across Asia and Africa who call for Islam, who proclaim in harmony that “the Quran is our constitution”; but beyond the single slogan are countless ideals. In this diversity, not in the monolithism promoted from Qum, rests the enduring vitality of Islam.